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Gossip site making waves in cyberspace

By Ric Leyva
The Associated Press

- To reach Mr. Showbiz on the World Wide Web, go to http://www.starwave.com/showbiz

NEW YORK — In the grand tradition of Mr. Coffee and Mr. Clean comes Mr. Showbiz, a catch-all entertainment and celebrity gossip Internet site where being a fan is fun.

It's part on-line tabloid tattler, part cyberstargazing supertelescope.

Irreverent and often biting, Mr. Showbiz calls itself "the service dedicated to bringing you the information that you really need, whether you know it or not."

Going far beyond the bare bones home pages and publicity photo download sites put up by the TV networks and movie studios, Mr. Showbiz is a big-bucks operation boasting its own news staff, chat rooms and regular interactive features, such as a celebrity bellybutton identification game.

Saucy spots within the World Wide Web site include The Daily Dose, Mouth Off, Group Therapy, Terminal Chat, Tabloid Headlines and Apocalypse Pretty Soon.

"We're not out to change the world here," says editor in chief Susan Mulcahy, a former New York gossip column editor. "This is basically to give people a respite from the front page."

Both slicker and cuddlier than any Internet competitor, Mr. Showbiz is also smarter, capitalizing on the instant buzz and respect accompanying use of the masculine courtesy title in the American marketplace.

"I wanted it to have a personality, which is why it's called *Mister Showbiz*," Mulcahy says by telephone from her suburban Seattle office, adding that she's already fended off complaints from irate feminists.

"I wanted it to look kind of '50s and have a distinct voice," she says. "To get that voice you have to go with one gender or another."

The pervading personality is aloof but approachable, the look is casual retro-cool and the voice is amused, skeptical and sometimes just short of sarcastic. It's all too perfect.

In its own words, it's an integration of "elements of a daily newspaper, a humor magazine, a television variety show and a 1973 Dodge Dart."

Mr. Showbiz is part of Starwave Corp., a booming multimedia publishing and on-line company headed by Paul G. Allen, who helped found Microsoft Corp. and owns the NBA Portland Trail Blazers, among many other things. Its publisher is Tom Phillips, co-founder of Spy magazine. Editor James Albrecht came from The New Yorker. Writer Mary Bruno is a Newsweek alumnus.

"We're serious journalists here," Mulcahy says, "very, very serious."

DAILY LISTS

The starting point is The Daily Dose, where Mr. Showbiz presents a list of pop culture events that happened on that date in history, birthdays of the famous and notorious and a whimsical industry insiders' vocabulary builder.

Then there's the Scoop, a jam-packed gossip column so hot that New York newspaper gossip mavens have begun to borrow items from it.

"Mary Bruno has been breaking a lot of stories lately," Mulcahy says proudly. "We've gotten a lot of pickup on that, which is very good, obviously."

In the Mouth Off section you can enter Group Therapy, Mr. Showbiz's main chat area, or send via e-mail letters to the editor. Those with questions like, "What brand of oven cleaner did Alice use on 'The Brady Bunch'?" have Ask Mr. Showbiz as a ready resource. Answers are posted daily.

There's also The Water Cooler, where your opinion counts. Respond to gripping questions of the day, such as which TV hospital emergency room you'd go to with a gunshot wound or which "Friends" star you'd leave behind if you could only save five of the six cast members. Most say Matt LeBlanc. Sorry, Matt.

LIVE CHAT

Weekly live chat sessions with celebrity guests are on tap. There are also light-hearted star Q&A's where regular questions include, "Have you ever punched or kicked anybody?" and "What's your favorite kind of bagel."

In Tabloid Headlines you can survey unsavory overlines from publications worldwide. In Apocalypse Pretty Soon you can stay up to date on the latest end-of-the-millennium news. In The Watch you might find funny celebrity photo juxtapositions, a celebrity body parts identification quiz or the bellybutton contest.

Mr. Showbiz also has comical yet insightful movie reviews, star biographies, entertainment industry news from Variety and even a serial novel "Until Tomorrow" by five different fiction writers who take turns.

TEAM OF REGULARS

Launched in May, Mr. Showbiz has built a large body of regulars, some of whom even have their own chat rooms now, such as the Spamnation. Usership is 38 percent female, unusually high, since general on-line usership is more than 80 percent male.

"It's a fun service," is Mulcahy's only explanation. "The content is directed at anyone interested in popular culture and entertainment. I guess that's very appealing to women."

Advertisers are starting to buy space in Mr. Showbiz, and eventually the all-free service will have paid subscription areas. But in the meantime, Mulcahy and the gang are working on name — and format — recognition.

"It still is a relatively small percentage of the populace at large that is on-line," she says. "It's growing. And the number who've gotten on line in the last year is pretty amazing, but still.

"When I first took this job, I had friends who asked me where they could tune in to watch my show. They'd ask, 'What channel are you on?'"

Babe element of Barbie doll makes exhibit

The Associated Press

NEW YORK — You've known her as a sorority gal, a socialite, a clean-cut party girl. But did you know that Barbie once strode through Times Square, naked except for a Happy New Year hat?

The greater and lesser known personae of the ubiquitous Barbie doll are explored in "The Evolution of a Cultural Icon," which opens tomorrow at the Liberty Street Gallery in the World Financial Center.

Barbie

The exhibition details the history of said icon, from a retrospective of dolls and their often-outlandish get-ups, to sometimes sexy, sometimes sarcastic portrayals of you-know-who in paintings, sculptures and other media.

"Many artists," concedes co-curator Valerie Steele, a Yale-educated fashion historian, "are interested in the 'babe' aspect of Barbie."

It's fitting, then, that this Barb-O-Rama begins with her 1950s German prototype, "the notorious Lilli," which had a face like Barbie's but a "much tartier" attire — and reputation. Lilli, notes Steele, was not designed for children, but "for grown-up men."

Except for that Times Square episode (more on that later), Barbie has mostly retained her squeaky-clean, 1959 image as she gallivanted through the Lost Generation and beyond.

There's Barbie the cheerleader, the socialite, the sweater girl, the "hausfrau," (at least, to a point; "Barbie doesn't vacuum," says Steele), the torch singer, the teacher, the astronaut.

The Barbie phenomenon has attracted plenty of artistic attention, too. Which brings us to Part 2 of the exhibition.

"There's a high-speed element in a lot of" the artworks, says Steele. "Sometimes they use her as a joke, sometimes as an idol, sometimes they hate her guts."

The sponsor's only restriction, said Steele, was to "make sure we didn't take the 'babe factor' too far, because kids will see it."

Gallery-goers will see a 6-foot-high portrait frame, ringed with silver-skirted Barbies; Madonna-like Barbies, sexy German Barbies in translucent black lace; a Barbie lovingly held by King Kong; a Barbie take-off on ancient Greek art.

And, of course, "Barbie New Year," Jill Greenberg's 1995 "digital montage," inspired by the B-movie, "Attack of the 50-Foot Woman," shows Barbie, "waving and beaming like Miss America," striding through Times Square. She's naked except for her Gatsby-style New Year's hat.

"The fact that she's silver," reasons Steele, "abstracts her nakedness."

The exhibition will run through Feb. 18. The suggested $2 donation goes to four children's museums.

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